

A CONTEMPORARY REFLECTION ON THE CHINESE TRADITIONAL MODE OF THINKING

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Abstract

In China's path to modernization since the 19th century, some intellectual traditions have been disappearing, leading to the awkward situation faced by Chinese people of being “neither Chinese nor Western” or “being Chinese and Western at the same time”. *Zhongdao* (中道 the middle road or the middle course), the mode of Chinese traditional thinking, avoids the Western dualism and it considers *Tian* (天 heaven), *Di* (地 earth) and human beings as being a whole. In such an approach, human beings are placed in an important position, because they could change their mode of existence according to their thoughts to make *TianDi* (heaven, earth including society) creating a sense of harmony. A revival of such thinking can be helpful to solve many of the problems faced by human beings today.

บทคัดย่อ

ในหนทางสู่กระบวนการสมัยใหม่ของจีนตั้งแต่ศตวรรษที่ 19 จารีตทางปัญญาบางอย่างได้หายสาบสูญไป ซึ่งทำให้ประชาชนชาวจีนต้องเผชิญหน้ากับสถานการณ์ที่กระอักกระอ่วนกับการ “ไม่เป็นทั้งจีนหรือตะวันตก” หรือ “เป็นทั้งจีนและตะวันตกในเวลาเดียวกัน” *Zhongdao* (ทางสายกลางหรือวิถีสายกลาง) แนววิถีคิดแบบจารีตประเพณี ของจีนหลักเลียงทวินิยมแบบตะวันตก และพิจารณา *Tian* (สวรรค์) *Di* (โลก) และมนุษย์ในฐานะที่เป็นองค์รวม วิธีการแบบองค์รวมนี้จัดวางมนุษย์ให้อยู่ในตำแหน่งที่สำคัญ เพราะว่ามันสามารถเปลี่ยนแนววิถีของการดำรงอยู่ตามแนวคิดของตนที่จะทำให้ *TianDi* (สวรรค์ โลก รวมทั้งสังคม) สร้างสรรค์ประสานกลมกลืน การฟื้นฟูวิถีคิดแบบนี้สามารถช่วยแก้ปัญหาต่าง ๆ ที่มนุษย์กำลังเผชิญอยู่ทุกวันนี้

Raising the Question

The development of thinking, the ability to observe and mindfulness, are effective means for the development of a society. A specific mode of thinking develops historically. Therefore, because of their different living environments, the ways of practicing and cultural conditions, the Eastern and Western modes of thinking developed differently. In consequence their ways of knowing and practicing that directed by thinking are different. However, any judgment about which mode is better cannot be made, they are just different.

Since China's defeat in 1840, Western technologies, institutions and thoughts have been gradually assimilated by the Chinese. Many of the Chinese intellectual elite, like Gong Zizhen, Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, Hu Shi, Lin Yutang, Lu Xun, Liang Shuming, Chen Duxiu, and Li Dazhao, compared the West with China, and have concluded that almost in every aspect China had fallen behind the west. As a result, such derogatory terms as ignorance, naivety, backwardness, etc., had become associated with China.

The May Fourth Movement is the first instance of the intellectual elite's thorough rethinking of Chinese traditional culture. They made systemic critique of Chinese traditional politics, economics and culture. The New Culture Movement, following doctrine of "overthrow Confucianism and learn from the West", swept across the country. The new efforts to develop vernacular Chinese, simplification of Chinese characters, the development of science and the development of democracy, became known by the masses quickly through the intellectual elite's advocacy. There is no doubt that Chinese people were enlightened and Chinese society had progressed as a result of the above-mentioned movements, but some extreme ideas, like "there's no need for young man to read Chinese books" (Lu Xun), "China is backward in everything" (Hu Shi), "abolish Chinese character" (Qian Xuantong) and "throw Chinese traditional books to toilet" (Wu Zhihui), also emerged. The situation was just as Hu Shi's saying in *The Chinese Renaissance*,¹ "there's revolt everywhere and tradition is thrown away. The authorities and traditional beliefs are lost and cheap beliefs and new-worship are emerging". To change the Chinese modes of thinking and learn Western approaches, Yan Fu translated J.S. Mill's treatise

tise of logic in Chinese and introduced it to Chinese people. Because philosophy is the ground of the mode of thinking, so the later scholars also tried their best to learn Western philosophies. Even until now, the criticism to Chinese tradition still concentrates on the criticism to Chinese mode of thinking, the representative issues are provided by Bo Yang and Chu Yu who think that the major reason for China's backwardness is the Chinese mode of thinking and that the Chinese must learn the Western scientific mode of thinking in order to progress. Bo Yang wrote a book called *On Ugly Chinese* which claimed that Chinese culture is a "sauce urn culture". And Mr. Qian Hong had a lecture on "There must be innovation in the modes of Chinese Thinking", claiming that we should be trained in metaphysics. Chu Yu published a book in 2010, called *The Animadvert on Chinese Thinking Mode*, he indicated that the reason for China's falling behind is due to its traditional mode of thinking, and claimed that we should learn from the western mode of thinking especially scientific thinking.

However, the mode of thinking of one nation is grounded deeply in its history, and it cannot be uprooted totally by simple advocacy of rejection and revolution. Therefore on the way to modernization, we find that Chinese traditional mode of thinking is in decline but the Western mode of thinking has not yet taken hold. That means Chinese people fall into embarrassing situation of being "neither Chinese nor Western" or "being Chinese and Western at the same time".

There have been many expositions on the differences between Western modes of thinking and Chinese. For example, the Chinese mode of thinking emphasizes synthesis, entirety, induction, hint, implication, ethics, intention, intuition, imagery and circle models, whereas Western mode of thinking emphasizes analysis, individuality, deduction, exactness, clarity, recognition, objectivity, logic, demonstration and linearity. Chinese traditional thinking seeks common ground while keeping differences, but Western traditional thinking distinguishes from common ground. Just as Ludwig Feuerbach's assertion, "the easterner sees unity without differences, whereas the westerner sees differences without unity".²

In fact, these specific modes of thinking have been molded in specific living environments of each nation and function in part to solve existential problems, so each mode of thinking has its own rationality and is

the motivation of formulation of a kind of national character. Nevertheless, it is clear that each mode of thinking has its own merits and shortcomings. For instance, Chinese traditional thinking is good at shaping an integral, systematic and active grasping of the world and of things, and Chinese medicine, Qigong and Chinese health preserving are rooted in a valuable form of thinking that emphasizes intuition, the blurring of sharp distinctions and dialectics. But these aspects of Chinese traditional thinking also created the conditions that made it unable to formulate the objective Western scientific forms of knowledge. We can also see the dual character of Western thinking in that on one hand it has been the great impetus of modernization but on the other hand it restricts the integrated development of the human being.

Because thinking is rooted in living activities, the change of existence should lead to the change in the mode of thinking. From this perspective it would not be rational for one mode of thinking to object to another, or to abandon one's own mode of thinking to cater for an unfamiliar one. An either-or method should be avoided, because it results in the thinking of binary oppositions that has been strongly criticized and abandoned by contemporary philosophies. Therefore what we have to do instead is to clarify the different aspects of each mode of thinking in order to grasp the way it occurs and progresses. The ground of this method lies in that, "man is the producer of his own notions, thoughts... consciousness in any time is the awareness of being, and the being of man is his actual living process".³ This is the basic view of historical materialism of Marxism.

***Zhongdao* as the Chinese Traditional Mode of Thinking**

Thinking of *Zhongdao* (中道 the middle road) involves the traits of integrity, blurring of distinctions and dialectics, that constitute the specific character of Chinese thought compared with Western thought. Western philosophy functions here as "the other" which allows us to determine the traits of Chinese thought. Binary thinking, making antithesis between subject and object, phenomenon and substance, reason and perception and so on, is the characteristic of mainstream Western philoso-

phy, whereas there is no such pattern in Chinese traditional thinking. As mentioned above, Chinese thinking takes *Tian* (天, heaven), *Di* (地, the earth) and human beings as a whole and makes “human beings” an important concept. The function of Human beings involves an awareness of existence in an interactive process with their environment including both nature and society. People should be “the heart of *TianDi*”. That means, the world is taken as a life entity, and human beings, as a smaller life entity, should live properly in it. The proper existentiality is changeable and relatively balanced. Because of changing of environments and emerging of new demands of people, balance is regularly broken. Therefore the importance of human being lies in the awareness of life, just as Lao-tzu’s saying, “He who knows others is wise, he who knows himself is enlightened, he who conquers others has physical strength, he who conquers himself is strong”.⁴ A real wise and strong man should know himself better and control himself more than others. The attitude of self awareness should not only be taken by a person but also by a nation.

The purpose of self-awareness is to enhance the ability to live together and perfect one’s personality. People could change their ways of living to attain the *Dao* (道, the way) and see their worlds much clearly. Such mode of thinking implies great vital energies. The long history of Chinese surmounting challenges to its survival, the flourishing of “Asian four little dragons” (Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) in the 1960’s which held Confucian doctrines and the big advance of China in the last thirty years could all be taken as the examples of the merits of such thinking, they are continuing to develop.

The meanings of *Zhong* or *ZhongDao* is rooted in its etymology. The first is to be right, proper and impartial. The word “Zhong” (middle) emerged early in China and represented the central position of a mast in carapace-bone-script and bronze-script. The ancient connotation is that the mast must be upright to allow distant people to see a flag. So in this sense “Zhong” has the meaning of occupying a proper point where one stand in an unconquered state. The philosophical meaning of “Zhong”, listening to both sides and choosing the middle course, has originated from this primitive meaning.

The mainstream of Chinese cultural tradition had formed itself in the process of conflict and fusion of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhist

beliefs, and the thinking of *ZhongDao* has become the common way. In the *Book of Changes* Confucius indicates that to position oneself in “Zhong” is proper, that means avoiding extremes and at the same time not doing one thing and neglecting another. For instance, when emperor Yao abdicated the throne to emperor Shun, he told him “Yun Zhi Jue Zhong” (, keep to the centre), and emperor Shun also told emperor Yu “Yun Zhi Jue Zhong” (, keep to the centre) when he was demised. In the orthodox passing, from emperor Yu to Tang, to Wenwang, to Wuwang, to Zhougong, to Confucius and to Mencius, the instruction “keep to the centre” was passed on too, so this saying had been taken as the essence of Chinese cultural tradition. Confucius held the point that all things had their own extent and that in excessive and chaotic situations harmony was the middle course. He said, “Since I cannot get men pursuing the due medium, to whom I might communicate my instructions, I must find the ardent and the cautiously-decided. The ardent will advance and lay hold of truth; the cautiously-decided will keep themselves from what is wrong”.⁵ Excessiveness and chaos, the extreme tendencies of things, or wrong tendencies, are objected to by Confucius. For instance, one’s conducting oneself is neither *kuo* (, overdoing) for what is beyond one’s grasp nor having no ambition at all. Much strict or loose administration should be rejected. In the book *Confucius’s Precepts to his Family*, he said that “tampering force with mercy is the harmony way of administration”. Later Mencius inherited Confucian saying, he said, “A great artificer does not, for the sake of a stupid workman, alter or do away with the marking line. Yi did not, for the sake of a stupid archer, change his rule for drawing the bow. The superior man draws the bow, but does not discharge the arrow. The whole thing seems to leap before the learner. Such is his standing exactly in the middle of the right path. Those who are able, follow him”.⁶ *ZhongDao*, right in that, there is a requirement for people’s searching and practicing. People can conform to the middle course, but the middle course can never conform to the actions of people.

In Taoism, Lao-tzu also said, “Much talk will of course come to a dead end. It is better to keep the center (*Zhong*)”.⁷ *Tao* is the central notion in Lao-tzu’s thinking, but *Zhong* is the way of grasping *Tao*. The meaning of *Zhong* is grasping unchanging thing in changing things in order to deal with different matters. An important methodological prin-

ciple of thinking of ZhongDao is avoiding extremes and one-sidedness, so in Lao-tzu's thinking there are many discourses on "things turn into their opposites when they reach the extreme". Chuang Tzu also applied thinking of ZhongDao to solve life issues. He said that in the humanness and handling of affairs one should "grasp one to deal with many" and "take the middle course to attain harmony". Then he took the story of dismembering an ox as skillfully as a butcher as an example to explain "Pursue a middle course as your principle". That means ZhongDao is the way of preserving one's life. In the view of Buddhism, ZhongDao is the highest truth avoiding extremes. At the same time it is the standard of behaviors, the only way of emancipation through cultivating.

Chinese Buddhism also regarded ZhongDao, to have avoided the extremes of operating as an ultimate goal on one hand and as a rule of conduct on the other. The Middle School (The Madhyamika, created by Nagarjuna) opposes extremes, which eventually influenced Chinese thought.

The three schools, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, are the main streams of Chinese traditional culture, and all follow the way of ZhongDao. This had prepared the philosophic foundations of the Chinese mode of thinking.

As a consequence of the above, the difference between thinking of ZhongDao (the Middle Road) and thinking of dualistic opposition can be clarified. The former emphasizes harmony of multi-elements and avoiding extremes. ZhongDao and the similar thinking of *ZhongYong* (中庸, the mean) and *ZhongHe* (中和, neutralization) together constitute the core of Chinese traditional thinking. They also have become the rich sources of Chinese wisdom and deeply influenced the attitudes of lives of Chinese people. This kind of thinking provides a much broader horizon for discoveries. That means proper adjustment and right ways become possible.

The second character of ZhongDao is *Yi* (义, righteousness). That means proper and reasonable: at a proper time one takes a proper method to attain the best result. When Confucius talked about how to become a gentleman, he said, "When the person in authority is beneficent without great expenditure; when he lays tasks on the people without their repining; when he pursues what he desires without being covetous; when he maintains a dignified ease without being proud; when he is majestic with-

out being fierce”,⁸ “being expressive of enjoyment without being licentious, and of grief without being hurtfully excessive”⁹ and “The superior man is dignified, but does not wrangle. He is sociable, but not a partisan”.¹⁰ These are not only standards for conducting the behaviour of people, but also standards for the administration of a country.

To grasp the essence of this proper method one should also pay attention to *ShiZhong* (時中, taking a proper time) and *Quanbian* (權變, acting according to circumstances). “ShiZhong” means taking the way of Zhong at the right time. The notion of time was introduced to the concept by Confucius. In his opinion, there is no abstract Zhong, that presence and historicity are important characters of Zhong. That means following the way of Zhong should be flexible and one should take actions that suit concrete circumstances. “Quanbian” (權變) is changing, but not without principle. That means grasping the right way in concrete changing circumstances. “ShiZhong” and “Quanbian” include judgments of value and the art of administration in the following ways: following comprehensive assessments, advancing with the times, seizing opportunities, and finding something new in what is old. In Mencius’ view, ZhongDao’s concrete application is solving the problem of what is the relation between principle (Jing) and change (Quan). Changing should come from principle. But persisting in principle and neglecting concrete circumstances, changing becomes impossible and the real Zhong cannot be accessible. In his book, Mencius relates the story of the “saving the sister-in-law falling into the water” and “Shun (an emperor) saves his guilty father” as examples to interpret the problem concerning the relation between principle and changing. Also we can take Confucius’ Ren (Humane) as an example. There are many statements in Analects about Ren, but there is no single statement that could be taken as the definition of Ren. Many people consult Confucius concerning Ren. Their questions have been born in a different context. So Confucius’s responding is special and indicative. To generalize the definition of Ren cannot be the right way. Such intentions could also be found in Daoism and Buddhism. Therefore, the essence of ZhongGuan is not only practical but also concrete.

The third character of ZhongDao (the Middle Road) is the unity of oppositeness and interdependency. *The Book of Changes* said, “The Yin (陰) and the Yang (陽) make up the Dao”. That means all things in

world are pairing, involving a transformation between Yin and Yang and coexisting in harmony. In the *Book of Changes* we read “Looking up, he observes the pattern of the Tian (天, heaven?; looking down, he examines the order of Di. (地, the earth)”, “changing according TianDi to follow the way of TianDi”. The meaning of ZhongDao, as acting according to TianDi, described here. Confucius also said, “Am I indeed possessed of knowledge? I am not knowing. But if a mean person, who appears quite empty, ask anything of me, I set it forth from one end to the other, and exhaust it”.¹¹ This is the description of Confucius’ searching of ZhongDao. The saying in *The Doctrine of the Mean*: “so raise it to its greatest height and brilliancy, so as to pursue the course of the Mean”¹², has the same meaning.

All things can be motivations including contradictions. These contradictions are unities of oppositeness and are involved in a process of balance. Once the balance is disturbed, things would go to extremes. Therefore to keep things proper, man has to follow the right way (ZhongDao). Confucius said that, “Where the solid qualities are in excess of accomplishments, we have rust; where the accomplishments are in excess of the solid qualities, we have the manner of a clerk. When the accomplishments and solid qualities are equally blended, we then have the complete man”.¹³ He also said, “While respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom”.¹⁴ Saying in a modern language is keeping two sides and abounding in one side.

Therefore, another trait of ZhongDao, and Chinese traditional mode of thinking, is the notion of Du (度, degree) consideration, measure). People who think in this way change their existential modes properly according to the concrete circumstances to maintain situations of peace and harmony.

The Contemporary Significance of Thinking Mode of ZhongDao

There have been many controversies on how tradition should be considered, but it is clear that without the ground of tradition innovation cannot be made. It seems to me that the advocacies of revolution in thinking and reform of mode of thinking represent the deep reflections on the

limitations of traditional thinking and the worries that it might hamper integrated development. Actually, “the integrated development of people” should be advocated directly. Because the mode of thinking is still a kind of abstracting, and the integrated development of people should include all kinds of activities of innovation.

According to the thinking of ZhongDao, the deviation mentioned above should be adjusted through transformation of thinking of the people, both Eastern and Western. The reason of this transformation lies in the fact that the deviation of people’s thinking has occurred and the circumstances have changed. The two facts are now actualities. On one hand, the deviation of thinking of Chinese people from early modern times has created a situation of “neither Chinese nor Western”. On the other hand, it is essential that the existence of science is decisive today and the meaning of human lives has been enriched in an unprecedented way. Facing this reality the relevant existential conditions of life and thought cannot be ignored. In Chinese traditional thinking, the lack of scientific thinking has led to the advocacy of science in May Fourth period. The tremendous development of science and technology in China, the emergence of many excellent scientists, and the acceptance of science and technology as a primary productive force, has occurred as a result. But because of the inertia of traditional thinking, the scientific thinking must be consciously promoted. Therefore, the thinking of ZhongDao could play an important role here. But we should also be conscious of the fact that scientific thinking is not the only effective thinking. So the intuitive and organic characters of Chinese traditional thinking should also be utilized fully. This is necessary for the requirements of concrete variable lives. The harm of scientism, the consequences of the extreme unbalanced development of scientific thinking, should be rejected.

At the same time, the competitive spirit, the spirit of justice, the spirit of legal contract and the spirit of equality, which accompany market economy, are insufficient in Chinese traditional thinking. People must establish these ways of thinking through learning and adapting. In fact, the process of China’s opening and reforming is also the process of a changing thinking. For example, the great discussion on truth in 1980s and the disputations concerning universality and generality in recent years are examples of such a process. The Chinese people’s predilection for ac-

commodation also demonstrates this.

Western notions connected to globalization provide us a contrasting reference system. Through these contrasts an awareness of the weaknesses in our thinking becomes possible. Michel Foucault deems modernity as “an attitude”, which relates to a kind of thinking and a kind of acting. Such kind of mode could also be understood as the spirit of an actual historical time. It is very clear that the modernization of thinking could be the most important factor of modernity. Therefore we have to adapt our thinking to meeting the requirements of modern society. But this should be on the ground of tradition. This applies only to the Chinese, but also for Westerners, this is an urgent task.

Every nation is facing the challenge of transforming their respective modes of thinking within globalization. Radical changes in people’s ways of living have taken place in the development of science and technology, especially the development of information technology. At the same time, the transformation in modes of thinking has also occurred, in which the Multi-dimensional interaction and the open innovation are the main tendencies. That means people should search for the balance between integrating and analyzing, logic and intuition. Therefore in the background of this comparison of Chinese and Western modes of thinking, is the recognition of the importance of reconsidering of the merits and deficiencies of both Chinese and Western thought, and the creation of a new active wisdom to solve problems.

Today our discussions on the value of Asian culture could be very significant. The domination of Western culture in recent centuries should be overcome. In fact, even in the West, many people of insight have begun reflecting their own culture and finding new sources for reflection from the East. In order to remain one nation’s own identity without assimilation of Western culture, people should understand their own cultural heritage. If so, the effective communications between different nations and contributions to world harmony could become possible.

Endnotes

¹Hu Shi, “*The Chinese Renaissance*”, *Selected writings on Hu Shi*, Yuanliu Publishing House, Taiwan, 1986, volume 24, P179.

²Ludwig Feuerbach, *Hegel critique of philosophy, Selected writings on Feuerbach*, The Commercial Press 1984, Vol.1, P.45.

³Karl Marx. Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology*, People’s Publishing House 1961, P.19.

⁴*The Lao Tzu*. Chapter 33. cf. Wing-Tsit Chan. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*.

⁵*Analects*. 13.21. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.

⁶*The Works of Mencius*. 13.41. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.

⁷*The Lao Tzu*. Chapter 5. cf. Wing-Tsit Chan. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*.

⁸*Analects*. 20.2. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.

⁹*Analects*. 3.20. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.

¹⁰*Analects*. 15.22. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.

¹¹*Analects*. 9.8. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.

¹²*The Doctrine of the Mean*. Chapter 27. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.

¹³*Analects*. 6.18. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.

¹⁴*Analects*. 6.22. cf. James Legge. *The Chinese-English Four Books*.